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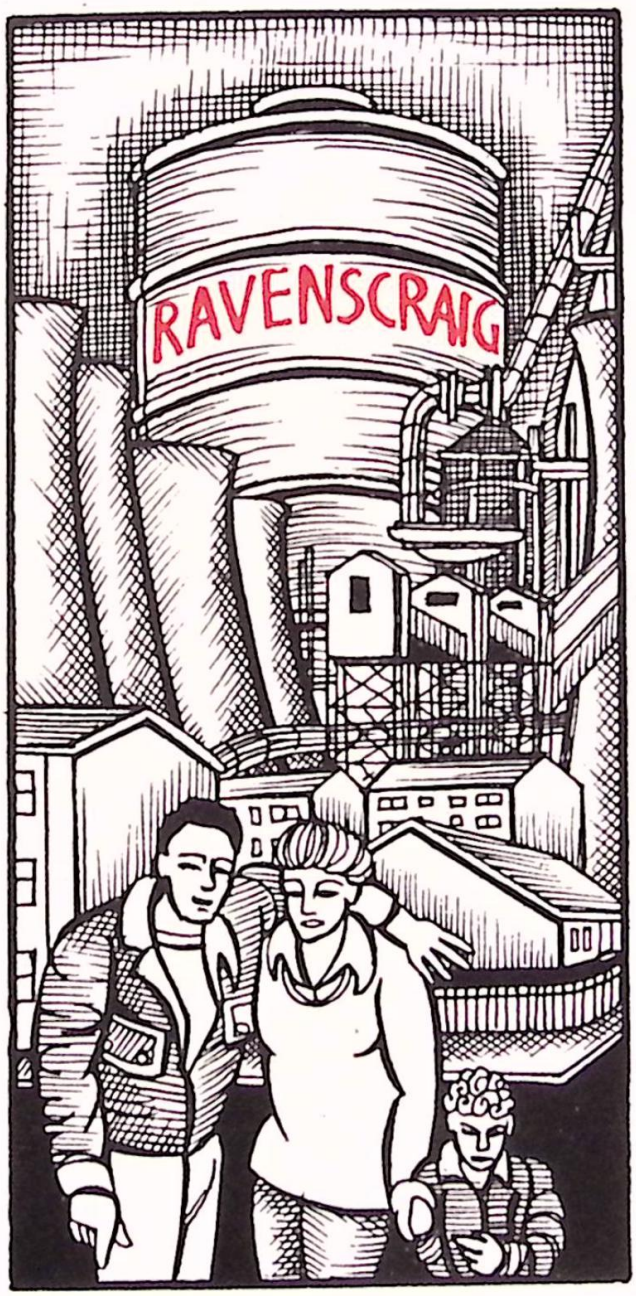
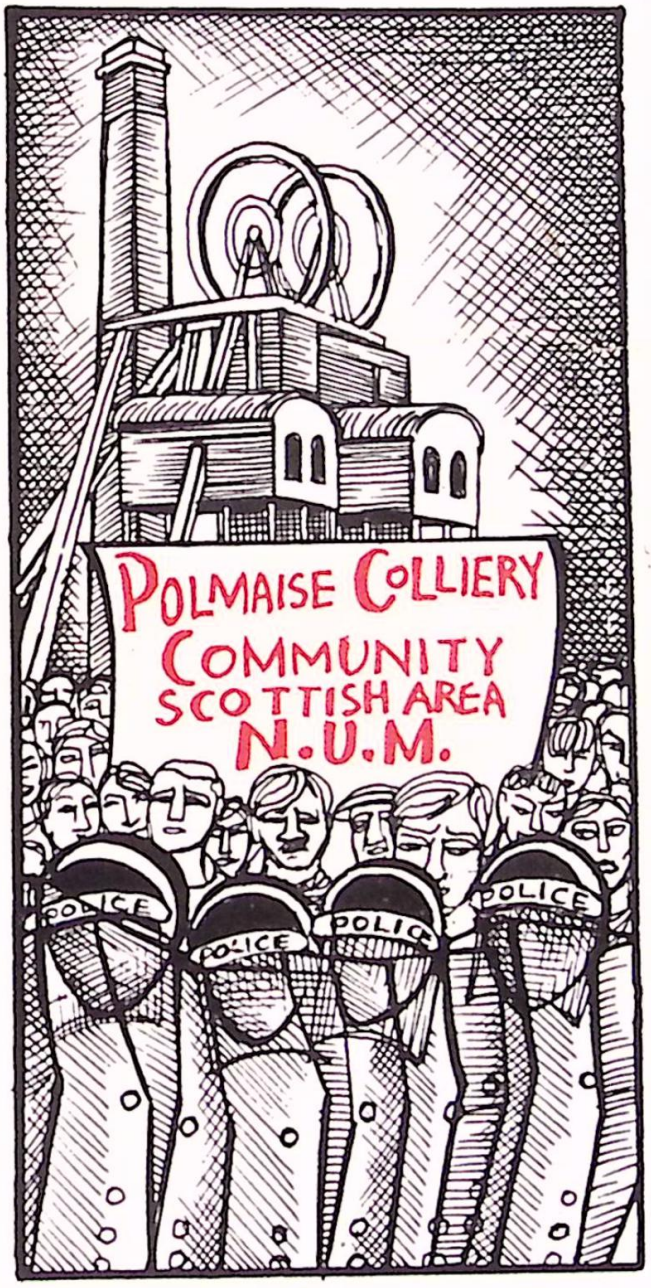
FIGHTING FOR SURVIVAL

THE STEEL INDUSTRY IN SCOTLAND





by

JAMES KELMAN

". . . which is one reason why myself and many other folk continue to avoid the S.N.P., not to mention the rest of the parliamentary parties."

FIGHTING FOR SURVIVAL

The Steel Industry in Scotland

by
James Kelman
(foreword and essay)

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acknowledgements:

The Scotland on Sunday newspaper for supplying me with the impetus.

The men who shared the drink at a certain Ravenscraig pub.

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Tommy at Clydeside Press for his enthusiasm.

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dedication:

For the steel workers and their families,
and the struggle to come

Foreword

A version of this article appeared in the Scotland on Sunday newspaper (May 20th 1990). It was 'edited'. Reasons given were 'lack of space' which in this instance I find not only hard to believe but impossible. I think it has more to do with distortion and is in keeping with recent developments within the Scotsman group as a whole, perhaps in particular the censorship and suppression scandal connected with The Scotsman 'Letters Page' last year. The purpose of publishing it now in pamphlet form is simply to produce it in its entirety; by displaying the 'edited' bits in **bold type** emphasis will be given them: attention will thus be drawn to certain aspects of the overall argument, like the way in which to my mind the Scotsman group, by the act of deletion, obscured it.

The Arts Page, like any other newspaper page, has been involved in censorship battles for decades. Myself and other writers have been experiencing this for most of our working lives. There is nothing new about it. But it is important people understand the levels on which it continues to operate. And further, that as a direct consequence of suppression within the media, many important factors never gain entry into the arena of public debate, eg. the collusive role of the T.U.C. in the right-wing's progressive war on the labour movement and the left in general.

In the past it has affected myself and other writers of fiction and poetry in different ways. If you write a story or poem through the eyes of a man or woman whose daily use of language includes certain words which are conventionally regarded as 'taboo' then there is never any likelihood of your story or poem being used by the media – not only the Scotsman group but every other group, including the BBC and IBA. As recently as last year, when my novel A Disaffection was published, an Arts Page member of the editorial team at The Scotsman was not allowed to publish extracts from it. Eventually extracts from a novel by P. G. Wodehouse were used instead.

Yet somehow the general public has come to regard this form of suppression as fair enough, to the extent that most people – including most

political activists I meet – don't regard it as 'real' censorship at all. But there is only censorship. Freedom of expression either exists or it doesn't. In this country it never has. When a voice is being suppressed it is being suppressed. These things have to be hammered home. It so happens that the voices being suppressed with the utmost consistency are those from that group of people herded under the somewhat anachronistic label of 'the working class'. But it also includes people from so-called 'different' groups and communities, including those on the front line of the battle against racist violence by which I mean the black community. How many members of the T.G.W.U., let alone the labour movement in general, will be aware that the worker who was stabbed to death some 54 times in the head last year, apart from being 'black' was also an *active* T.G.W.U. member, one who did the weary leg work with a collection tin on behalf of the miners' struggle? How many T.G.W.U. members are now involved in the campaign on behalf of his widow and five daughters? Real solidarity is almost always obscured by 'bipartisan fronts'.

One aspect of my argument is the need to examine 'Thatcherism'. The term is misleading, it distorts the issue and the left should scrap its use immediately. The Prime Minister is simply a cog in a much larger machine. The world of capital is more sophisticated than the use of the term implies. Those within the higher reaches of power in this country weren't sitting about waiting for a leader to be born. She was selected. When a person is selected people are responsible for that selection. If she hadn't been around somebody else would have been chosen. The very notion of 'Thatcherism' suggests what is now happening in this country began with her: and will therefore end with her.

The history of high politics in the 1950's, 60's and 70's is one of collusion, of covert operations and not only in Ulster. One of the more interesting features in U.K. politics is not the part played by folk on the right, but those on the so-called left, especially those linked to "the core organisation in these anti-communist (anti-socialist) manoeuvres in the British labour movement – the Trades Union Congress."

It is very easy to be dismissed as a 'conspiracy' theorist but great caution must be exercised whenever people within established authority circles start clamouring on behalf of 'united fronts' and 'bipartisan campaigns'. We don't have to hypothesise too much. There are precedents. We can look at earlier groups from 'right', 'left' and 'centre' who campaigned on 'united fronts'. It is always instrumental to see just who is uniting with whom, and what possible interests they could conceivably share; in the face of what possible 'common enemy'.

This takes us beyond the scope of a 'foreword'.[1] Yet, in passing, it is worth mentioning some of the pressure groups who have pushed for 'united fronts' in the past – organisations like Common Cause and Industrial Research and Information Services to name but two in which

folk from the 'left', 'right' and 'centre' marched shoulder-to-shoulder: Labour MP's and TUC full time officials; Liberal MP's and Tory MP's, and certain other individuals either directly or indirectly connected to such 'bipartisan' organisations as Moral Re-Armament, the Economic League, MI5 and MI6, various CIA-funded European 'united fronts', eg. the Information and Documentation Centre, Anti-Bolshevik Bloc of Nations etc. etc.

I am not suggesting for one moment that any of the above mentioned sinister outfits can be linked to the campaign to save 'Scottish' steel. However, it is difficult to be anything but cynical when you see Thomas Brennan[2] and Malcolm Rifkind, plus diverse other MP's, party politicians, full time union officials and members of the church all shaking hands and praising each other profusely for the great campaign they are now leading. There are simply no grounds on which this sort of posturing can be trusted. Only the opposite. If people do pin their hopes on such a right/left/centre deal then they'll be living in a form of fantasy world, similar to folk who buy Murdoch or Maxwell newspapers in the off chance they'll win a million pounds in a beauty contest. And as far as the support of 'Labour-controlled' Strathclyde Regional Council is concerned: this is the largest employer of low paid workers in Scotland we're talking about.

The miners' struggle continues to set the precedent for the men and women engaged in the steel industry. Things like productivity are little short of joke issues in the contemporary world. It doesn't matter how many 'man-hours' are required to produce a ton of coal if a company has unlimited men to draw upon and the 'price' and working conditions of the men is on an unlimited downward spiral, thanks to 'sensible' settlements by 'realistic' trades union officials in 'negotiation' with 'determined' management, backed up by 'strong' Government 'forces', i.e. the police and the army.

It is a big world of private enterprise out there; one in which freedom to choose and freedom to exploit amount to the same thing, 'freedom'; freedom for them and bondage for us.

In the act of denationalisation - of having what belongs to us sold on behalf of us to us - we lose the right to have any meaningful debate in decisions that affect not only ourselves as individuals, but the future of our families, communities and countries. We become 'interferers' in things that don't concern us. Matters of economic strategy are purely 'commercial' and are the property of big business corporations. They must be entrusted to those who 'job it is, the so-called experts, men like Sir Robert Scholey and Sir Ian MacGregor. The folk who control the national and multinational corporations of the world also control the communities of the world. It is old news everywhere - except, apparently, as a point of order in the continuing struggle between organised labour and capital. But any so-called agenda which isn't premised on 'the news' is a fraud.

The article was commissioned by Scotland on Sunday on the Wednesday the closure was announced, and is the first piece I ever wrote for them. I was given a personal guarantee; no political interference; they knew my work and what to expect. The first version I gave was thought to need more personal reflections at the outset, an editorial point which I accepted and still regard as sound editorial judgment. I got the finished version to them on Saturday at around 9.30 a.m. and I believe they went to press an hour later. I don't know who is responsible for the final 'editing'. Perhaps a couple of bits were 'unintentional'. Who knows. Many acts of suppression are. People working within the mainstream media often assume the validity of an existing political reference point and by tacit agreement never challenge it. By presenting the full version here readers will be able to judge the 'intentionality' or otherwise for themselves.

1 See LOBSTER mag., 214 Westbourne Avenue, Hull HU5 for more info.
2 Present convenor of the Ravenscraig workforce; responsible for the 'hanging himself on somebody else's cross' statement.

Fighting for Survival

WHILE in the Ravenscraig area the day after the announcement of the strip mill closure a steel worker in a pub told me this was a time for bipartisan action, that the Scottish people must adopt a united front in an all out effort to save the steel industry. His was roughly the same line as that being offered by a large majority of folk, including most of the media and most of our parliamentary politicians, with opinions perhaps diverging only on the extent to which investment should be private or public. Even Michael Forsyth and other Scottish advocates of **what is now known as** Thatcherism seem to be 'pledging the Tory party to campaign to save the mill'. In the words of the current S.T.U.C. general secretary, 'All of Scotland must unite behind the campaign and set aside the sniping and points scoring we have seen in recent times.'

The last time in this area I confess I was going to Wishaw dogtrack with two friends so my mind was elsewhere, I didn't notice the 'Craig skyline. I was reminded of this a couple of days ago when a television programme led off the topical interest side of its report by showing a steel worker whose job is under threat coming home from walking his greyhound – a practise that's always appealed to me, living in Glasgow, for the way it forces you to breathe fresh air. There was a nice open field across the road from this particular dog owner's house so he wouldn't have had to walk too far to find space, although I'm not sure how fresh the air is. I used to work in a copper mill which is very different from a hot steel strip mill; that was 25 years ago and the factory was down in Salford, I used the experience for the background to one section in my novel A CHANCER where the young central character touches a white hot copper bar with the toe of his shoe, it bursts into flames instantaneously. I remember going back up to Glasgow and my mother at some point washed my workclothes. She was surprised by how green the water kept turning. I also remember the taste of sweetness every time I smoked a cigarette.

The best time for an outsider to see the Ravenscraig skyline may well be

at night although I confess a bias; it can't be as bad as Port Talbot, but only because of the concentrated nature of the South Wales operation. Everything is so hemmed in and stifling down there. It's only the proximity of the sea makes it bearable. Years ago I used to drive quite frequently between Swansea and Cardiff and once you hit the Jersey Marine road the skyline resembled a form of hell, the flames erupting from enormous chimneys, dense and coloured smoke. During the day you still see the fire and smoke, but the image is more down to earth: you become immediately aware of the rows and rows of housing where the steel workers and their families live, tucked right beneath the enormous chimneys - you also see washing hanging out to dry and are maybe struck by the thought the clothes will come in more dirty than they went out. In the Ravenscraig area the families are luckier, if only because of the space, although it now seems this is about all they'll be left with.

My sympathies are with the steel workers; like the miners many of them may still be engaged in the type of work where avoiding death or serious injury is a technique to be applied three or four times per hour. Working conditions such as these can provide an easy sentimentality for outsiders, they are also easy to mythologise. I don't want to get into that. But there is no question that the men who do such work have every reason to take pride in what they do. And a certain bonding always exists between those involved in dangerous jobs, it involves a quite particular irony - which makes an outsider feel slightly insecure in their presence. The men I spoke to are angry, they are absolutely angry. It is very predictable. But there is also a sense of hopelessness and if as an outsider I can never reach the depth of the steel workers' anger, it is this sense of hopelessness which induces the anger in myself.

How do the men and women directly concerned in this latest disaster fight what is happening to them? and amongst all those shouting so loudly over the past few days who is going to offer genuine support? Or even genuine hope? Are there any real grounds for hope? What sort of precedents have those with any political clout set such that the steel workers in Scotland - or any workers in Scotland - should be feeling cheered by the prospect of 'united fronts' and 'bipartisan campaigns'?

The man I spoke to was not alone in thinking the fight for survival needed more than the Ravenscraig workforce to achieve success. **To engage in a struggle with the present face of British capital that has to be true.** But is bipartisan action of the kind being suggested an authentic possibility? Can folk from right, left and centre of the political spectrum call a truce in order to address a 'truly serious' matter, i.e. one that somehow **isn't merely political but** concerns the nation as a whole **(given the idea that we can refer to Scotland as a nation)**. This idea that the interests of the country at large can be expressed irregardless of political and economic differences is

very suspect indeed, which is one reason why myself and many other folk continue to avoid the S.N.P., not to mention the rest of the parliamentary parties.

What do we actually mean when we talk about the 'interests of the country as a whole'? At what point do the interests of the individual citizens who actually live there enter the argument?

Even in the event of the steel industry being saved, whether by private or public investment, or a mixture of both, what then? Here we are in the middle of 1990: in what sense can a country such as Scotland 'have' a steel industry? As things stand I no longer know what this entails, although as far as Sir Robert Scholey and other corporate managers are concerned, it is certainly a time for caution at the upfront end of the market, by which I mean primary production.

In the ever expanding market economy now being 'made available' to private capital both in Europe and elsewhere at least one thing is clear: a country can compete or not. But if it does compete then the 'fair price' of its product may well be reckoned alongside the same product from a country where labour relations are a function of the War Department. Who could compete in a 'free world' coal market, for example, where the price is set somewhere around that obtaining in South Africa under the present white racist regime? The outraged voices of Scottish steel workers, politicians and others, arguing over the tremendous productivity at the 'Craig is understandable, but in such a context is irrelevant and something of an anachronism.

There is no room for sentimentality in business. Nor is there room for 'politics'. There is no room of any sort of outside interference at all. People are to stick to their own backyard and not meddle in what doesn't concern them. Somewhere along the line we seem to have lost not only the 'right' to work but the right to even discuss the matter. Upper management must be empowered to perform its job as it alone sees fit, for it alone has the expertise to judge on matters of commercial enterprise. And if the production of steel does not 'pay' in this country then it may well pay in another – perhaps Poland or Hungary or East Timor – but if not then it will be time to move out of steel altogether, perhaps into another industry, culture for example, or waste disposal. The fact that steel production or coal production or ship production has traditionally been at the heart of a country's economy cannot be allowed to stand in the way. As Sir John Harvey-Jones reminded sentimental corporate managers recently, in reference to the "biggest mistake" he ever made while engaged in the oil business, "beware of the allure and attraction of your own creation".

In the same column Sir John gives an interesting insight into the expertise of corporate management when he tells us that prior to the last few years

business theory was in favour of vertical integration. That was largely because companies were able to measure the benefits, but they couldn't measure the risks. It was only from the early eighties that everyone (sic) realised that vertical integration means putting most of the capital behind the front end of the business, which has the highest risk. (Independent on Sunday, 13th May).

If there is to be an attempt at a bipartisan campaign to save Ravenscraig let it begin with an appraisal of the situation now facing the workers and their families, and all those others whose livelihood depends on the steel industry, directly or indirectly. I mean a genuine appraisal.

For hundreds of thousands of people throughout Great Britain the last decade or more has been a form of nightmare. The plight of the steel workers and others in the Ravenscraig economic belt is a direct effect of the past 20 or so years strategy of those who make decisions on behalf of Government and big business. Elsewhere throughout the land other groups and communities have been assaulted and battered. This is why folk don't need to visit the area to appreciate or sympathise with the steel workers' plight. Unfortunately we are innured to bad news.

The steel workers themselves have been coming to terms with the inevitability of Sir Robert's decision to terminate their working lives for some years. They've also had to cope with the knowledge that there is next to nothing they can do to save the industry, not on their own. Given the present circumstances the harsh truth is that it isn't their industry at all, it is part of the property of British Steel; and if by any chance there is a takeover at the Scottish end it still won't be their industry, it will belong to the shareholders, Scottish or otherwise.

Sir Robert Scholey will have made his decision to close some long while back; only the timing has mattered. **He is the head expert.** It is his job to make such decisions, as Conservatives (sic) **Ian Gow, Nicolas Ridley and now the Prime Minister herself,** have all reminded Malcolm Rifkind. Margaret Thatcher had prepared the way in her recent televised declaration of how utterly – **and no doubt morally** – wrong it would be for the state to interfere in the internal affairs of a private enterprise. **As far as those who control the Tory party is concerned the ultimate closure of the steel industry in Scotland has nothing to do with the people who live there, it's strictly business, a question of management;** the argument should therefore be conducted by the appropriate managerial team. In this respect Sir Robert Scholey has a good and true track record, his expertise has been instrumental in transforming the industry during the past few years into a 'hugely-profitable concern', at the slight cost of some 90,000 job losses.

If there can be such a thing as a national campaign then it must also be a time to stop talking about 'redundancies'. The immediate 800 job losses at Ravenscraig and the estimated 15 to 20,000 that may eventually follow are

not the personal property of individual people. If jobs can be said to belong anywhere it is to the community at large. Like the 529 tobacco workers in Glasgow who were given their closure announcement last week the steel workers are all too aware that a job is something other folk can have as well as yourself. When somebody leaves or retires somebody else takes over. A job isn't a 'thing' to be bought or sold. In accepting the concept of redundancy payments the labour movement accepted a quite straightforward Tory principle. But at root the concept is fraudulent.

The main spectre haunting the steel workers is not so much the closure of Gartcosh rolling mill: it is the 1984–85 miners' strike. It is no coincidence that Sir Robert Scholey and Sir Ian MacGregor used to 'hit it off well' together, **to quote from last week's Scotsman, with both 'their Thatcherite faith and Sir Robert's belief in the need for great secrecy about corporate operations' helping them to get along.**

Almost every worker in the country has 'learned his or her lesson' from the assault on the miners, but those involved in the steel industry have particular cause. Like the rest of us they were forced to watch the horrific treatment meted out to ordinary men and women whose one crime was to fight for the economic survival of their communities. Ironically, however, as John McCormack (one of the victimised miners) pointed out in his fine book *Polmaise: the Fight for a Pit*, "The biggest battles with the police in Scotland came at the pickets of the Ravenscraig steelworks and the Hunterston terminal in Ayrshire where foreign coal stocks for Ravenscraig were landed."

For the steel workers the miners' lesson is especially bitter. In the pubs and clubs and other places people meet in dialogue images of the miners' strike will not be erased easily and must colour all talk of 'united fronts'. The events of the 1984–85 struggle are more than a memory, just ask some of the sacked miners who are still being victimised, or the widows and families of the men who died. **Those within the inner circles of Government power executed that particular battle quite ruthlessly. And though though a good deal less shady in their own dealings over the affair the S.T.U.C., as well as the T.U.C., as a collective body, did little more than allow the isolation of the N.U.M. leadership.**

The steel workers are also having to cope with the stark fact that so many of them declined to 'hang themselves on somebody else's cross' six years ago. It was members of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation who unloaded the 'foreign' coal down at Hunterston. These things have to come out into the open: if the spectre of the miners cannot be erased then any campaign on a united front is scarcely more than a joke in very bad taste. The miners, ex-miners and their families know better than anybody the sorts of pressure the Ravenscraig men were under, it isn't a time to bear grudges, the steel workers were fighting for survival even then, and that was before Gartcosh.

Nowadays it is common knowledge that the strategy of confrontation was planned by those central to Tory power as far back as the early to mid 1970's, funnily enough, around the same time those at the helm of Big Business had become 'very disillusioned'. This strategy seems also to have included the adoption of a strong right wing figurehead – a role the current Prime Minister fulfils very adequately – which makes it the more crucial that those in opposition to the 'apolitical' business directives of the present Government give up acting as though the toppling of Margaret Thatcher is the end of the road. At best such a position is simply naive. At worst it is more than a farce, it is straightforward collusion. But unfortunately 'collusion' is one of the occasional outcomes of the bipartisan united front approach. The first meeting to discuss the campaign was held yesterday morning, it included several members of the S.T.U.C. and Strathclyde Regional Council. It will be interesting to see how matters develop.

And what will happen if the steel workers' struggle for survival fails and this last bastion of industrial Scotland collapses? Perhaps it is simply time to move into another industry, culture for example, or waste disposal. This is 1990 and it is difficult to avoid cynicism if you live in Glasgow which might be described as cultural capital of Strathclyde Regional Council as well as European City of Culture. Last Wednesday, in common with many thousands of other people involved in the campaign against the Poll Tax, I at last received my warrant notice: fortunately for myself as a writer, the sheriff officers acting on behalf of Strathclyde Regional Council won't poind the word-processor on which this is being composed.

Wednesday was also the day that the announcement of Sir Robert Scholey's decision was made. That same evening Glasgow's cultural vanguard attended Luciano Pavarotti's concert, for which he received a 'six figure sum' and the orchestra nothing at all apparently. Perhaps Sir Robert Scholey attended, he too is a man of culture, in fact he is an opera buff. There is nothing wrong with opera. I happen to like it myself. This was also the day that the portrait of Van Gogh's doctor, painted several days before the artist's suicide, was sold in New York for £49m. And too, in cultural competition with Pavarotti's concert, this was the evening of the Pittodrie match, the night it became very difficult to dream of a successful conclusion to the campaign for Scottish World Cup glory. At this point my disillusion with bipartisan united fronts becomes hard to contain. Monday's news, that we are about to become one of the biggest dumping grounds of toxic industrial waste in the world leads the way into further speculation; maybe Saatchi & Saatchi will provide us with a pithy slogan to corner the market – European Capital of Garbage perhaps. The last thing required by the steel workers and their families is another dose of humbug.

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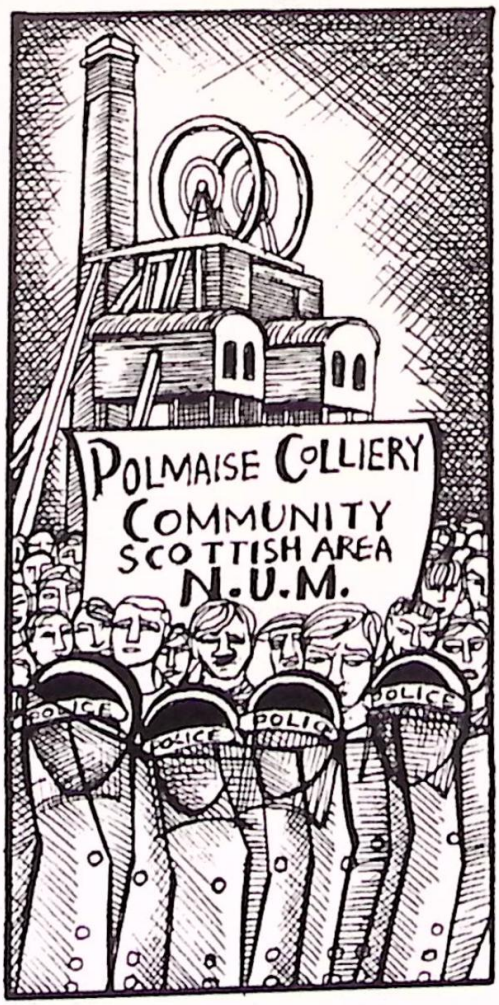

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